

SAF V Survey Report

Social Support and Adjustment among Army Civilian Spouses

Dennis K. Orthner, Ph.D. & Roderick Rose, M.S.

The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

December 2005

Background

Army spouses and families function best when they live in an environment that is socially supportive. Research has consistently demonstrated that family well-being and relational adjustment are much higher when family members have other people in their lives that encourage them and to whom they can go for practical and emotional support. Social scientists often refer to this aspect of life as "social capital" since the presence of support provides a set of valuable assets that can be marshaled to promote resilience and foster positive outcomes. Similarly, "relationship capital" reflects the internal assets or strengths of a family that help to buffer the stresses that inevitably occur in any family, but can be aggravated by deployments and other stresses associated with Army family life.

The Army provides a supportive environment, as well as services, that are designed to encourage family well-being, connections between families, and informal networks of

Key Actions

- ❖ Strengthen programs that target marriage and relationship skills.
- ❖ Develop and promote efforts that encourage family connections to other families in their community.
- ❖ Improve efforts that promote volunteer opportunities and help spouses connect to each other.
- ❖ Use ACS, MWR, chaplain and other resources to stimulate inter-family connections.
- ❖ Assist unit commanders in efforts to encourage stronger marriages and to promote inter-family connections as a readiness support tool.
- ❖ Encourage commanders to take proactive steps – such as providing family time – when the mission permits.

community support that can promote positive adjustments and strengthen well-being during periods of challenge. This

climate of support helps meet the objective of the Army Well-Being Strategic Plan through which individuals in the Army attain a positive sense of well-being. Relocations and periods of separation are not only potentially stressful for families but the stress can impact the readiness of the Soldier and his/her unit. Thus, it is in the best interests of the Army to promote social support and adjustments among the families of its Soldiers.

The objective of this report is to provide an analysis of the strength of social support among Army spouses and to determine the role of social support in adjustments to Army life and to the demands of deployment and separation. Social support is examined as a complex set of potential assets that, if strong, can contribute to family resilience and adjustment.

Key Findings

- ❖ Two-thirds (65%) of Army spouses rate their marriages as highly satisfactory.
- ❖ One in four spouses (24%) report significant marital problems after deployment. Half (52%) report communication difficulties.
- ❖ Half (56%) of Army spouses have a close friend nearby they can count on during difficult times.
- ❖ Four in ten (42%) spouses see their installation community as supportive and helpful.
- ❖ Half (50%) of parents see the Army community as a good place to raise younger children.
- ❖ All of the relationship and community support factors examined significantly predict spouse adjustment to the Army and successful deployment coping.

Data Source

The U.S. Army Community and Family Support Center (CFSC), in conjunction with the U.S. Army Research Institute for the Behavioral and Social Sciences (ARI), has conducted Surveys of Army Families (SAFs) every 4 years or so to examine areas important to Army families. The most recent survey (SAF V) was conducted between September 2004 and January 2005. A previous survey (SAF IV) was conducted in April through July 2001. This survey is one way to assess the effectiveness of the Army's Well-being Initiative.

Key questions related to social support from within the family and from others in the community were included on the 2004-2005 SAF. Data on spouse adjustment to Army life and to the experience of deployment were also collected. The 2004-2005 SAF was specifically designed to address these questions with 3 forms of the survey distributed. Form 1 was sent to spouses whose member was currently deployed to a theater of operation. Form 2 was sent to spouses whose member had been deployed to a theater of operation but had returned in the past 12 months. Form 3 was sent to other Army spouses. Data from these 3 survey forms were difficult to compare to earlier surveys due to the unique nature of current deployment patterns. For the analyses in this report, data are drawn from all the spouse groups but only include those spouses who live in the installation community where the Soldier is assigned. Since these surveys are conducted from a sample of Army spouses, any interpretation of the findings should take into account the sampling error (SEs). For this report the following SEs apply: overall sample = +/- 1%; officer spouses = +/- 2%; enlisted spouses = +/- 2%. For sub-group analyses, when the sample sizes are smaller, an SE of +/- 3-4% is used to detect significant differences.

Key Findings

The findings in this analysis are provided in 4 sections: (1) Marital Adjustment, (2) Friend and Family Support, (3) Community Support, and (4) Social Support and Spouse Adjustment

Marital Adjustment

A key source of support in Army families comes from the strength of the relationship within the marriage itself. Over half of Army Soldiers are married and their readiness for duty is widely understood to be affected by the quality of the relationship with their spouse. At the time of the SAF V survey about two-thirds (65%) of Army spouses reported high levels of marital satisfaction (see Table 1). In contrast, one in four spouses (23%) could not rate their marriage as highly satisfied or they considered themselves dissatisfied with their marriages. These rates of marriage satisfaction are only slightly lower than in 2001 when 67 percent of spouses rated their marriage highly and 22 percent rated their marriage more poorly. It should be noted that those spouses experiencing the longest deployments have somewhat lower rates of marital satisfaction (no table). Among those with a Soldier spouse deployed 6 months or less during the past 36 months, 65% report high marital satisfaction compared to 60% of

	High Marital Satisfaction	Low Marital Satisfaction
Officer	74	15
O1-O3	74	15
O4-O6	75	15
Enlisted	63	26
E1-E4	60	28
E5-E6	63	25
E7-E9	66	22
Female	65	23
Male	61	28
White	67	21
Black	59	31
Hispanic	65	25
Overall (2004-5)	65	23
Overall (2001)	67	22

spouses whose Soldier was deployed for 18 months or more. Even more significant, the rate of low marital satisfaction rises from 25% to 32% among these same families.

The following are additional key findings from this analysis of the recent SAF survey:

- ★ Spouses of officers report higher marital satisfaction (74%) compared to enlisted spouses (63%). Among junior enlisted spouses, 60% rated their marriage as satisfactory and 28% as unsatisfactory. Satisfaction rates are higher among senior grade enlisted spouses (66%).
- ★ African-American spouses report significantly lower rates of marital satisfaction (59%) compared White (67%) and Hispanic spouses (65%).
- ★ These modest rates of marital satisfaction among Army spouses have the potential to significantly and negatively influence the readiness and retention of Army Soldiers.

The strength of marital relationships in Army families also can be examined in terms of the extent to which spouses report relationship problems that have to be resolved. Researchers have known for some time that the quality and stability of a marriage is affected by the ability of the couple to overcome problems, not just report their relationship as satisfactory. In the SAF V data, questions about marital problems were only asked of couples experiencing deployments; these couples were asked if they had experienced marital problems in the past 6 months and if it was easy or difficult to adjust to marital intimacy and communication (along with other issues) with their spouse after he or she returned.

The data indicate that significant numbers of married couples experienced relationship problems after a deployment (see Table 2). One in four (24%) spouses reported moderate to great marital problems. This percentage is similar to the percent of couples reporting low marital satisfaction on Table 1. Indeed there is a high correlation ($r=.61$) between reporting marital problems and low marital satisfaction. Other findings include:

- ★ Specific problems with restoring intimacy and communication are much more common than reports of overall marital problems. Over one-third (37%) of spouses with a recently returned Soldier from deployment report difficulties with marital intimacy and over half (52%) of spouses report strains in marital communication.
- ★ OCONUS spouses do not report higher rates of marital problems than CONUS spouses but do report higher rates of difficulty with marital communication.
- ★ The length of the Soldier's deployment has a significant negative impact on marital problems. Spouses experiencing more months of deployment in

Table 2: Percent Reporting Marital Problems--Deployed Spouses Only

	All Spouses with Deployments	Spouses with Returned Members Only	
	Marital Problems Reported	Intimacy Not Easy	Communication Not Easy
CONUS	24	37	51
OCONUS	24	39	56
Deployed 0-6 Mo.	23	35	51
Deployed 7-12 Mo.	23	35	49
Deployed 13-18 Mo.	26	40	55
Deployed 19+ Mo.	31	44	57
Employed Full Time	26	38	53
Employed Part Time	24	39	53
Not Employed	23	36	50
Oldest Child 0-2	27	42	58
Oldest Child 3-5	27	40	56
Oldest Child 6-10	25	36	52
Oldest Child 11-12	23	36	49
Oldest Child 13-15	23	36	48
Oldest Child 16-19	22	38	50
Oldest Child 19+	17	29	41
Overall	24	37	52

the past 36 months are much more likely to report problems across all the problem categories reviewed. For example, among those with 19 or months of deployment experience, 31% report significant marriage problems and 57% report communication difficulties. Among those with 6 or fewer months of deployment, these difficulties are reported by 23% and 51% respectively.

- ★ Spouses who are not employed report fewer marital problems.
- ★ Spouses with older children report fewer marital problems.
- ★ The reported rates of marital problems after a deployment indicate significant challenges to Soldier support from their marital partner and significant risks to relationship quality and stability.

Friend and Family Support

Having a close friend, neighbor or family member living nearby can also be a significant relationship asset to an Army spouse and family. These relationships can provide counsel during times of difficulties as well as encouragement and support during everyday life and experiences. People who are connected to others have “social capital” that has been demonstrated to provide positive outcomes in terms of adjustments to new circumstances and overall personal and family well-being.

In the SAF V survey, spouses were asked if they had a “friend, neighbor or relative (besides your spouse) outside your home who will listen to you when you need to talk?” The results indicate that slightly more than half of Army spouses (56%) have such a confidant that they can “always” count on in their lives (See Table 3).

This suggests that many families try to make difficult adjustments on their own without outside help from friends or family. Other findings from this analysis include:

- ★ Officer spouses are much more likely to have close relationships (63%) compared to enlisted spouses (54%). The spouses with the fewest close relationships nearby are junior enlisted (47%).
- ★ The differences between spouses living OCONUS and CONUS are not noteworthy so the challenges of building relationships are common across all locations.
- ★ Civilian male spouses are the least likely to have close relationships (39%).
- ★ Spouses from Hispanic (47%) backgrounds have fewer close relationships than Black (53%) or White (58%) spouses.
- ★ Spouses who are employed or participate in volunteer activities are much more likely to have a close relationship than those who are not employed and not volunteering.
- ★ Distance living from post has no effect on the likelihood of having a close relationship.
- ★ Time living in the community has a significant effect on the likelihood of having a close friend, neighbor or relative. Spouses living in the community for one year or less are much less

	Relationship Available		Relationship Available
Officer	63	Employment status	
O1-O3	63	Employed Full Time	61
O4-O6	63	Employed Part Time	58
Enlisted	54	Not Employed	52
E1-E4	47	Does Volunteer Work	64
E5-E6	55	Does Not Do Volunteer Work	51
E7-E9	59	Live On Post	55
CONUS	55	10 Miles or Less from Post	56
OCONUS	58	More than 10 Miles from Post	56
Female	56	Live 0-12 Mo. in Community	48
Male	39	Live 13-24 Mo. in Community	56
White	58	Live 25-36 Mo. in Community	60
Black	53	Live 37+ Mo. in Community	63
Hispanic	47	Overall	56

likely to have a close relationship (48%) than those living the community for three or more years (63%).

Just as with marriage, there can be a discrepancy between a global sense of support from others and the specific support that may be required when a need arises. Army spouses were asked, "If I had a personal or family problem, I would be willing to turn to" one of the following: a friend, a neighbor, or a family member for help. The most common source of support is a family member with 90% of spouses saying they would make that contact (see Table 4).

Friends were also likely to be contacted by 82% of spouses. The least likely source of informal support is neighbors (37%). Overall these findings suggest that people will contact friends or family when problems or emergencies arise but ongoing personal relationships with neighbors, as reported on Table 3, are not as common among Army spouses. Other key findings include:

- ★ Officer families have much higher rates of connectedness to friends and neighbors than enlisted families.
- ★ Employed spouses have fewer connections to their neighbors but are just as likely as unemployed spouses to have friends and family members they can go to with needs.
- ★ Spouses who volunteer are much more likely to be connected to their neighbors and friends than those who do not volunteer.
- ★ Living on post does not increase the overall likelihood of support of neighbors and friends.
- ★ Length of time in the community increases connectedness but the greatest increase in building a network of friend and neighbor support occurs in the first year in the community.
- ★ It would appear from the data that the patterns of connecting with friends and neighbors are largely a function of the orientation of the family to purposively making these connections rather than to structural factors such as time or distance. For example, extended family connections are sustained for most families despite distance or availability. Similarly, while the demographics of families explain some variation in friendship support networks, the proportions of people with these connections are still somewhat similar across the characteristics of the families surveyed.

Table 4: During Personal or Family Problems, Percent of Spouses Willing to Turn To:

	Neighbor	Friend	Family Member
Officer	52	90	92
O1-O3	47	90	93
O4-O6	57	90	91
Enlisted	34	80	89
E1-E4	31	79	89
E5-E6	33	81	89
E7-E9	38	81	89
Employed Full Time	34	82	90
Employed Part Time	40	84	90
Not Employed	38	82	89
Does Volunteer Work	46	89	91
Does Not Volunteer	32	79	89
Lives On Post	39	81	89
10 Miles or Less from Post	35	83	91
More than 10 Miles from Post	38	83	89
0-12 Mo. in Community	34	80	90
13-24 Mo. in Community	38	83	89
25-36 Mo. in Community	40	83	89
37+ Mo. in Community	40	85	89
Overall	37	82	90

Community Support

The broader community also provides a supportive context for Army spouses and families. People live, work and play in their communities and can experience their community as a place that is open to newcomers and helps people in need, or a place that is closed to relationships and resistant to reaching out and helping others. The concept of "community engagement" is increasingly recognized as an important factor in personal and family well-being since families

often experience special needs that others can help address, and family quality of life tends to improve when there is an atmosphere of community helpfulness.

The spouses in the SAF V survey were given several statements about the supportiveness of their broader "installation community" to which they could agree or disagree. These included the extent to which people in their community "can depend on each other," "find it easy to make connections with other families", and "be willing to help" one another, even when they do not know each other. On these measures, there was significant variation in how spouses viewed the strength of support in their local installation community but, overall, only four in ten spouses (about 42%) rated their community as supportive (see Table 5). The findings clearly indicate that these three issues related to community support tap a very similar underlying theme since spouses responded to the three statements in a very consistent manner. Thus, perceptions that the community is "helpful" were rated very similar to the belief that families find "it easy to make connections". More specific findings include:

- ★ Officer spouses, especially senior officer spouses, are the only spouse group for whom the majority considers their community to be supportive. This is true on all three indicators of community engagement.
- ★ Only one-third of junior and mid-grade enlisted spouses consider their community to be supportive.
- ★ Spouses from Black or Hispanic households are less likely than White spouses to see their community as supportive; they are especially more likely to disagree with the statement that "families find it easy to make connections with other families".
- ★ Living on post increases the likelihood that families see the installation community as supportive.
- ★ The length of time living in the community has very little consistent effect on perceptions over whether the community is close and supportive. This suggests that supportiveness is part of the culture of a community and even people who are new pick up cues very quickly whether people help each other and reach out and make connections to one another in this place.

	People Willing to Help	People Depend on each other	Families Easily Make Connections
Officer	61	65	59
O1-O3	55	61	55
O4-O6	67	69	63
Enlisted	37	38	38
E1-E4	35	36	36
E5-E6	34	36	36
E7-E9	45	45	44
CONUS	41	43	41
OCONUS	46	46	45
White	43	47	43
Black	39	37	40
Hispanic	41	37	40
On Post	44	47	46
<10 Miles from Post	41	42	40
10+ Miles from Post	40	40	38
In community			
0-12 months	41	42	40
13-24 months	42	42	41
25-36 months	43	46	45
Over 36 months	43	46	44
Overall	42	43	42

The community as a supportive environment for children is also a critical indicator of community engagement. Children are the vulnerable citizens in a community and their security and quality of life are very important to parents. When a community is considered a "good place" for children, then parents understand that they are not alone in raising their children but have an

environment and resources that can back them up. In the SAF V survey, parents were asked if the "Army community is a good place for bringing up children," including those under 11 years of age and those 11 to 19 years of age. Overall, half (50%) of the parents reported that this is true for children under 11 and one-third (36%) felt this is true for adolescents (See Table 6). Other key findings include:

- ★ Spouses of field grade officers are the most likely to consider the Army a good place for rearing younger (71%) and older (49%) children.
- ★ Junior enlisted spouses are the most worried about the Army as a place to raise their children (42% for younger children and 32% for older children).
- ★ White parents are less likely to have a positive perception of the Army as a good place for children compared to Black or Hispanic parents.
- ★ Parents living on post feel more positive about the environment for children. Those living more than 10 miles from post have the least positive perceptions.
- ★ The length of time in the community does not have a significant effect on the perceptions of the Army as a place for rearing children. Again, this suggests that the culture of community supportiveness is acquired early in an assignment and tends to remain rather steady over time.

Table 6: Believe Army Community Good Place to Raise Children (% who agree)

	Good Place for Children Under 11 yrs.	Good Place for Children 11-19 yrs.
Officer	63	41
O1-O3	54	33
O4-O6	71	49
Enlisted	47	35
E1-E4	42	32
E5-E6	45	33
E7-E9	56	42
CONUS	50	37
OCONUS	49	34
White	49	33
Black	54	46
Hispanic	54	42
On Post	57	40
<10 Miles from Post	46	34
10+ Miles from Post	43	32
In community		
0-12 months	50	36
13-24 months	49	34
25-36 months	51	37
Over 36 months	51	37
Overall	50	36

Another aspect of community support can come from connections to a faith community. For many Army families, this can be a source of encouragement, support and connectedness. The

Table 7: Percent Willing To Go To a Faith Community For Help

Officer	64
O1-O3	62
O4-O6	65
Enlisted	48
E1-E4	44
E5-E6	48
E7-E9	54
CONUS	52
OCONUS	50
White	51
Black	63
Hispanic	47
Other	50
Overall	51

SAF V survey asked those spouses who had experienced a deployment if they had attended a church or synagogue during the period of the deployment. For those spouses, 60% indicated that they had participated in a faith community during this time. All spouses, however, were asked if they or their family had a problem, would they be willing "to turn to a religious leader or friends from a church or synagogue?" To this question, about half (51%) indicated they would be willing to do so (See Table 7). More specific findings include:

- ★ Spouses of officers are much more likely (64%) to turn to a faith community for support than spouses of enlisted (48%).
- ★ Spouses in African-American households are more comfortable reaching out to a faith community (63%) than spouses from White (51%) or Hispanic (47%) households.
- ★ Willingness to turn to a faith community for support is not influenced by the distance of the family from the post or by the

length of time in the community (not on Table 7). Thus, it appears that the connection to the faith community is determined more by the preferences of the family than by convenience or length of time in the installation community.

Social Support and Spouse Adjustments

Spouses can be expected to cope more successfully with the demands placed on them as Army families when they have a stronger network of social support. This network represents "social and relational capital" assets that can be relied upon to assist the spouse and family when needs arise and to provide counsel and encouragement as new situations must be faced. Even the strength of their marriage contributes to this sense of being socially supported.

To test this hypothesis, a comparison is provided between spouses who report that their family has adjusted well "to the demands of being an Army family" to those who indicate they have adjusted less well or badly. The data on Table 8 demonstrate differences in levels of social support among those who have high and low Army adjustments. Higher levels of difference between these two adjustment groups indicate areas of social support that can have greater impact on promoting positive adjustments. For example, among the highly adjusted Army spouses, 84% rate their marriage very positively. This is true for only 42% of the low adjusted Army spouses. In fact, all the dimensions of social support reviewed in this report make a significant and positive contribution to spouse and family adjustment. More specific findings include:

- ★ Spouses who report fewer marital problems, better communication and good relationship intimacy are much more likely to be better adjusted to the Army.
- ★ Having a close personal friend is a significant contributor to Army adjustment. This is much more important than having a family member to contact since both high and low adjusted families typically can count on their families.
- ★ Having a community that is perceived as supportive and connected is another important factor in Army family adjustment. All of the dimensions of community support are significant discriminators between high and low adjusted spouses. Over half (55-57%) of highly adjusted spouses see their community as supportive while this is true of less than one fourth (22-24%) of the poorly adjusted spouses.
- ★ The single most important community contributor to spouse adjustment is the belief that the Army community is a good place for children, especially younger children. Two-thirds (67%) of the highly adjusted believe this is true compared to 25% of the poorly adjusted.

Table 8: Social Support and Spouse Army Adjustment (% with each condition among high and low adjusted spouses)			
	High Adjusted	Low Adjusted	Difference (High- Low)
Marriage			
Marital Satisfaction	84	42	41
Low Marital Problems	92	60	32
Marital Intimacy*	78	46	32
Marital Communication*	67	28	39
Personal Support Network			
Have Close Friend	70	36	34
Neighbor to turn to	46	25	21
Friend to turn to	87	72	15
Family Member to turn to	91	85	6
Installation Community			
People willing to help	54	24	31
People depend on each other	57	22	35
Families make connections	55	24	32
Good for children aged 0-10	67	25	42
Good for children aged 11-19	52	17	35
Faith Community Connection	59	40	19
*Only asked of spouses reunited after deployment.			

- ★ Having a connection to a faith community also supports adjustment with 59% of the highly adjusted trusting their clergy or congregation to help them compared to 40% of the poorly adjusted.

When this same type of analysis is used to examine the potential contribution of social support to spouse and family coping during a current or recent deployment, similar findings occur (see Table 9). Overall, the rates of reported coping with deployment are somewhat lower than overall family adjustment to the Army, but each of the sources of social support contributes significantly to how well the spouse and family copes during the separation. Indeed, the ratings of marital adjustment, friendship connections and community support are all much greater among those who are coping well compared to those who are coping poorly. The specific findings include:

- ★ The spouses with fewer marital problems and overall marital strength are much more likely to report having coped well during the deployment.
- ★ Having a close friend is a very significant asset to deployment adjustments.
- ★ The observation that the community is well connected and that people reach out and help each other is especially important to deployed families.
- ★ The belief that the community is a good place for children is not as important to deployment adjustment as it is for overall Army adjustment but parents are concerned that their children are also supported during this time.
- ★ The faith community connection is also an important resource for many deployed families

**Table 9: Social Support and Spouse Deployment Coping
(% with each condition among spouses coping well or poorly)**

	Coped Well	Coped Poorly	Difference (Well-Poorly)
Marriage			
Marital Satisfaction	71	46	25
Low Marital Problems	86	58	28
Marital Intimacy*	71	48	23
Marital Communication*	58	33	25
Personal Support Network			
Have Close Friend	67	37	30
Neighbor to turn to	42	26	16
Friend to turn to	88	76	12
Family Member to turn to	91	86	5
Installation Community			
People willing to help	47	26	22
People depend on each other	52	23	29
Families make connections	50	26	24
Good for children aged 0-10	54	32	22
Good for children aged 11-19	39	23	16
Faith Community Connection	53	40	13

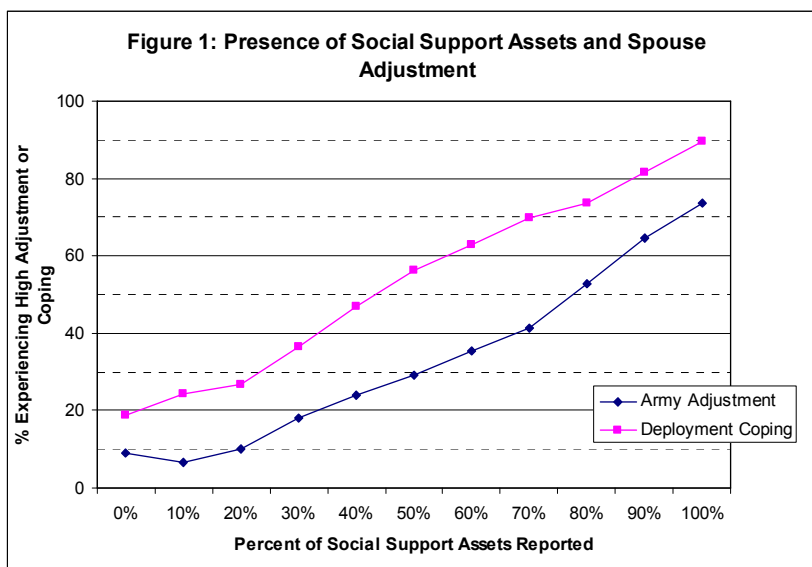
* Only asked of spouses reunited after deployment.

Conclusions

The results from this analysis of the 2004-2005 SAF V survey indicate that many Army families today do not have large social systems of support. One-third or more of Army marriages are experiencing relational difficulty. About one half of Army spouses have an on-going close friend or other trusting relationship that they can count on. Fewer than half of the spouses consider their community to be well connected or helpful. Half see their community as a good place to raise their children. And half believe that they have a clergyperson or religious congregation that they can go to if they have a problem.

This overall picture of internal and external social support links directly to how well spouses and families adjust. There is a consistent pattern in which spouses who operate with stronger social support connections demonstrate higher overall adjustments to Army life and significantly more success in coping with deployment separations. As the data in Figure 1 confirm, the spouses who are better connected and have a higher percentage of the social support assets listed on Tables 8

and 9 are the most likely to be highly adjusted. For example, only 19% of spouses with none of these assets are able to cope well with deployment compared to 90% of those with all of the social support assets at their disposal. This confirms other research which has indicated that families with more social capital assets, such as stronger marriages, friendships and community connections, are more likely to exhibit higher levels of personal well being and more positive adjustments to challenging circumstances. Since Army life often involves challenging circumstances, significant attention should be given to promoting greater social support for families, including those conditions that help to make such support connections possible.



Family resilience is in the best interest of Army leadership since family well being is directly linked to Soldier readiness and retention. The value of unit cohesion is well understood by chain of command; when this cohesion erodes, negative effects on readiness can be expected. Creating and restoring the conditions that make social and community support viable will require significant new efforts and priorities for programs and services that support family and community life. These efforts may include geographical expansion of programs into the community where Army families live rather than focusing on trying to get these families to come to installation facilities. New efforts may be needed to promote opportunities for Army families, especially for younger enlisted families, to come together and build connections with each other. Support programs may want to focus on building connections between people and not just addressing the specific needs of individuals or specific families. A continued and stronger focus on Army marriages as a foundation for military family support is also needed. Together, these and other investments in supporting marriages and community connections should pay significant dividends for Army leaders who covet improved family well being and stronger support from their Army spouses and families.